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Middle school for boys part of a trend toward single-sex education

By Liz Bowie

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The boys in the seventh-grade classroom wave their hands wildly and squirm in their seats, unable to contain their joy in a competition involving singular and plural nouns. Their teacher seems undaunted by the outbursts of cheering.

These are boys, after all. Sometimes they are loud.

In a struggling East Baltimore neighborhood, the middle-schoolers have begun their second year at an all-boys charter school whose creation marks a distinct shift in thinking about single-sex education in the public schools. Next fall its founders will open a college-prep school for boys, and a New York-based foundation will open one for girls in Baltimore. Meanwhile, in Prince George's County, a failing high school will attempt to improve by segregating the sexes for core academic classes.



Proponents argue that single-sex schools help students concentrate on academics and improve performance. Their resurgence has come about since 2006, when the U.S. Department of Education gave school districts more leeway to develop single-gender classes and schools, and there are now about 100 nationwide.

But the change also has ignited a debate over segregating students by gender, and the American Civil Liberties Union has opposed the nascent movement. In May, the ACLU filed a complaint in federal court charging that single-sex classes in a Kentucky middle school were illegal and discriminatory.

"In general, the ACLU is always concerned when we see gender segregation. But the situation of most concern to us is when students have no choice but to participate in single-gender classrooms or schools, or if students are shut out of valuable educational opportunities because of gender," said Bebe Verdery, education director of the Maryland ACLU.

While all-girls and all-boys schools are common among Baltimore-area private and parochial schools, only venerable Western High School for girls in Baltimore survived challenges that began in the 1970s,

when the federal government forbade gender discrimination in public education. Loosening those rules has created opportunities for those concerned about a national decline in boys' achievement.

That was the motivation of three African-American men who considered opening a charter school to help the population they believed to be most in trouble in Baltimore: young black males. Black boys were being assigned to special education at higher rates and were more apt to be suspended and to drop out. Particularly alarming to Carl Stokes, one of the school's founders and a former school board member, was that they were in the minority at most of the city's top competitive high schools, even ones that had once been all-boys schools.

They started Bluford Drew Jemison Science Technology Engineering Math Academy on Caroline and Biddle streets a year ago, gave the boys strict discipline and held them in school until 7 p.m. They also ensured added support with two full-time social workers and two interns.

"We inculcate our young men to be strong. We don't baby these boys over here," Stokes said.

Darius Kelly, 12, walking down the hall with his friends at Bluford Drew Jemison, said his school is a place "where you can stay focused and make something of yourself. ... We don't have our minds focused on girls." Teachers talk to the boys in a way that girls wouldn't understand, he said.

In a neighborhood where being smart and scholarly isn't always considered cool, Stokes believes his boys are setting a new standard in their white shirts, neckties and khaki pants. Instead of being picked on, he said, they have begun to put pressure on the boys on the streets of their neighborhoods.

While Baltimore is experimenting with many types of education reform, other localities have been more cautious.

In Frederick, the Monocacy Montessori Community Inc., which opened the state's first charter school years ago, applied to start an all-girls school but was turned down last year by the Frederick County school board. The group reapplied this year for a school focusing on learning foreign languages, said Angela Phillips, who has led the effort. She said the board rejected the first proposal in part because it believed a single-sex charter school was not legal.

The poor performance of boys led to the resurgence of single-sex schools. Although girls once lagged behind, they are beginning to outpace boys on many academic measures.

Consider that at every grade level in both math and reading, a higher percentage of girls pass the Maryland School Assessments, and in some cases the pass rates for girls are considerably higher. Girls outnumber boys by nearly 2-1 at the city's top five selective high schools.

And nationally, women make up 58 percent of college students this fall, according to the U.S. Department of Education. Only on the SATs are boys still able to hold on to their lead.

Some education experts have looked at brain research and suggested that boys were increasingly asked to perform in schools that were better suited to the way girls learn. Boys, some researchers argue, need more chances to move around in the classroom and should have more physical breaks in their academic day. Some all-boys first-grade classrooms have no chairs or make sitting in chairs optional.

Leonard Sax, a physician who has written books about gender differences, said his interest in the subject began when he saw a lot of 6- and 7-year-old boys coming to his Montgomery County office with notes saying they should be evaluated for attention deficit disorder. Brain research on gender, he believes, is complex and inconclusive. There is much variation among children, he said, and not all need single-sex classrooms or schools.

Lise Eliot, an associate professor in the department of neuroscience at the Chicago Medical School, believes this rush to embrace single-sex education is based on very little good research data. Most studies on the impact of single-sex classes and schools do not follow the protocol acceptable for scientific work and do not consider other factors that may have influenced the rise of achievement, she said. Generally, she said, the impact is small and helps girls the most.

"There is a real retro philosophy behind this and no data to support it," Eliot said.

Single-sex education was the norm in 19th-century Baltimore. City College was founded in 1839, then came Polytechnic Institute in 1843, followed the next year by Western High School and the private Boys' Latin. A few decades later, the private Bryn Mawr School and the Gilman School were built.

In 1972, an eighth-grade girl named Martha Ricci applied to Poly. She wanted to be an architect and argued that crucial engineering and math courses weren't available at all-girls Western. At first she was allowed to leave Western and go next door only to take those classes, but eventually the walls fell.

No boy ever challenged Western's all-girl status, and it somehow remained single-sex, one of a very few in the country. Principal Eleanor Matthews said the school has added more math, science and technology classes so girls can get whatever they need. Whether it is related to the renewed local interest in single-sex schools is unclear, but enrollment rose from 790 to 851 students this year.

Parents and students are coming because they believe the school has an excellent college preparatory program, Matthews said. Girls leave Western unafraid to compete with boys and more willing to take on leadership roles, she added.

At Bluford Drew Jemison, boys who entered sixth grade last year had test scores good enough to meet federal standards under No Child Left Behind, making it one of only three free-standing middle schools in the city to meet those standards.

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